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ABSTRACT

I intend to identify some of the important propositions which issue from fourteen empirical studies on political socialization, and to point to implications for schools and especially civic education programs. I define political socialization as the process of acquiring and changing the culture of one's own political environment. Among the propositions are: 1) statements of goals on citizenship objectives for schools are not consistent with social and political realities; 2) the major influence that the school has is to reinforce notions of allegiance and responsibility to the government; 3) schools do not provide political skills needed to participate effectively in political life; 4) the impact of the civics curriculum on political socialization is appreciable when social issues are focal and when they are discussed in the spirit of inquiry. (The paper discusses additional propositions.) Several needed changes emerge: 1) participation in decision making by faculty and students needs to be promoted at the levels of school governance and in formal instruction; 2) pressing social issues need to be dealt with explicitly and honestly; 3) programs in civics and history need to be drastically revamped to stress the skills of inquiry. (Author/JLB)

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Some Propositions about Political Socialization and the Schools in National and Cross-National Perspectives

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Some Propositions about Political Socialization and the Schools in National and Cross-National Perspectives*

Recently I had the opportunity to review, interpret, and summarize fourteen empirical studies on political socialization. The countries in which these studies were conducted included the North American continent, Western Europe, the Middle East (i.e., Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan), Africa (i.e., Sierra Leone and the Congo), and one country in Latin America (Colombia). These studies dealt primarily with the influence of the school on the political cognitions and attitudes of children and youth and their actions. I intend to identify here some of the important propositions which issue from this research and to point to implications for schools, especially for the people who plan civic education programs. I define political socialization as generally the process of acquiring and changing the culture of one's own political environment. Please note change component in definition. No attempt is made here to present these propositions in any particular sequence.

1. Statements of goals on citizenship objectives for the schools are not consistent with the realities of the social and political systems. This is made clear from the Goldstein study of curriculum guidelines, my own review of the Citizenship Objectives developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and earlier works conducted in the field.
2. The major influence that the school has (as measured either separately or by using a composite of factors relating to teachers, curriculum, socio-psychological milieu, school organization, textbooks and other sources, etc.)

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* This paper is based on author's chapter in Political Youth, Traditional Schools, to be published by Prentice-Hall in June, 1972.

is to reinforce notions of allegiance and responsibility to the government. Conversely, participatory political behavior directed toward change either within or outside the school environment is not supported by the school. The research by Levenson, Glenn, and Shantz conducted in the United States tends to support this proposition. Heggan who studied Colombian youth reports that while positive orientations toward the leaders and the country were expressed there were no cognitive bases to support these orientations. So these political attitudes remained unexamined and unreflected upon.

3. In line with the above, schools do not provide political skills which are needed in order to participate effectively in political life. This is clearly indicated by students in the study by Glenn. Writing a letter to the President and voting in an election appear with monotonous regularity. Very few children favor the activist's ways to bring about change.

4. The impact of the conventional civics curriculum on any of the political socialization indices (e.g., political efficacy, expectations for political participation, even political knowledge) is negligible. Ehman, Farnen and German, Heggan, and others strongly support this proposition. Students do not become more efficacious or knowledgeable as a result of having been taught about the governmental machinery or the history of political institutions. Explanations for this phenomenon may include: (a) the materials presented to youth are repetitive thus producing redundancy, (b) there is no depth in the course of studies, they try to cover a little bit of everything, (c) controversial social issues are ignored, (d) the content of civics is dull--students are not turned on by being exposed to it,

(e) students are not involved in generating and testing their own ideas about politics.

5. The impact of the civics curriculum on the political socialization of children and youth is appreciable when social issues are focal and when they are discussed in the spirit of inquiry. This is supported by the Ehman studies and the studies of the Michigan Social Issues Project. When issues are analyzed objectively and when students are given the opportunity to formulate and defend their own ideas about social and political events, they score relatively high on all important political socialization measures.

6. There seems to be a discrepancy among children and youth (perhaps in part as a result of the discrepancies between school and other social institutions) between the abstract and the concrete, the theoretical and the practical. At the level of political interest students score relatively high. When it comes to political action, however, even on such things as discussing public affairs with friends or going out of the ordinary to find appropriate reading materials on politics, students score relatively low.

7. In international political socialization the school, again, reinforces the attitudes prevailing in the larger community. Statt, for example, in his psychological study found that American schools much more than Canadian reinforce ethnocentric or what he calls "geocentric" predispositions.

8. In cross-national research, the peer group emerges as the most powerful group in the political socialization of children and youth. Billings who studied black activists in Michigan and Cave who studied the Young Pioneers in the Soviet Union support this proposition. For example, Billings found

that black activists unlike the rest of the youth of that age, exhibit greater sensitivities to the realities of the system. They learn, for example, that traditional institutions within the school (such as student government) do not bring about change. Change comes as a result of aggregation and interest articulation.

9. Organizationally speaking, successful peer group membership and clearly established but equitably divided power roles in the school are related to an individual's belief that he can control his own life. As one study indicated if a legal-rational system of governance exists and if students as well as faculty are truly participating members of a community, then the political efficacy of all participants will increase.

There are other propositions that evolve from the studies I have referred to, but for our purposes I will limit myself to the ones I listed here. I think we have enough findings at this point from a decade of political socialization research to bring about needed changes in the schools. I have summarized the proposed changes as follows:

1. The traditional way of school governance needs to be drastically changed. The separate and unequal streams of decision making, one for students, one for faculty, one for administrators, with administrators invariably having veto power over all the decisions must be immediately replaced by a truly democratic procedure. The traditional student councils and faculty assemblies have not provided for participatory behavior. In these meetings only trivial matters are discussed and the main protagonists (students, administrators and teachers) never come face-to-face to discuss issues. The important decisions are all made at the principal's office.

A new format of school governance would be predicated on the assumption that there are no areas of decision-making in which students cannot participate. Once this decision-making group becomes operational and it is institutionalized, its procedures and the roles assigned to various members of the group are communicated to all (students, parents, teachers, district school officials) and they are made explicit. Student handbooks which include the duties and obligations of students as well as their rights and freedoms are written for each school. Similar handbooks for faculty and administrators are made available. Thus individual rights of all the participants in school decisions are promoted and safeguarded. This operational procedure helps to bring about a system of mutual responsibility and accountability.

While the exact form that such a decision-making group may take cannot be spelled out in the abstract it should provide for a tripartite arrangement where power is shared by all concerned.

2. In addition to an organizational structure in the school which promotes participation in decisions there is need to deal with the process of decision-making in formal school instruction. Whether the subject is home economics, mathematics, science, art, or civics thorough and penetrating discussions of student involvement in the political life of the school and of the nation should take place. The legal rights of students and faculty should be carefully reviewed. Available materials should be examined and their implications for decision-making in the classroom, in the school, and in the community should be explored. Documents produced by organizations such as the American Association of University Professors, the American Civil Liberties Union, and material published by school boards as well as decisions issued by the courts can provide

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the basis for intelligent classroom discussion and action.[1] Particular cases where individual rights were involved, preferably in the students' own school, should be used as the case material to which the principles from the readings mentioned above should apply.

3. There is an urgent need to deal explicitly and in an intellectually honest way with the pressing social issues of our time. Whether it is the Israeli and fedayeen problem in Lebanon, the separatist movement in Canada, the question of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, or the problem of racism in the United States schools in the respective countries need to address themselves to social and political controversy. Given a climate of academic freedom students and teachers must study and reflect upon the main problems of society--the use of drugs, war as an instrument of national policy, unequal distribution of income, injustices in the interpretation and execution of law, unplanned population growth, etc. In a survey conducted in 1970 for Rockefeller's Task Force on Youth 55 percent of the college students interviewed believed that the United States is basically a racist nation.[2] Over one-fourth of the respondents also believed that "today's American society is characterized by injustice, insensitivity, lack of candor and inhumanity."

4. The programs in civics and in history courses need to be drastically revamped. Ninety-five per cent of the content of these courses such as descriptive accounts of the "One-Hundred-Years War," how a bill becomes a law, descriptions of U. S. Presidents or European monarchs must be deleted. The chronological

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[1] See for example, Student Rights Project, Student Rights Handbook; New York: New York Civil Liberties Union, n.d.; Rights and Responsibilities of High School Students, Board of Education, City School District of the City of New York, September, 1970; Jean Strouse, Up Against the Law: The Legal Rights of People Under 21, New York: New American Library, 1970.

[2] "Student Social Criticism Rises," Tallahassee Democrat, December 19, 1970, p. 5.

and narrative history starting with Mesopotamia and, at best, finishing with the Congress of Vienna must be given up completely. The enumeration of various branches of government in each level and the description of the various structural components should also be set aside. Instead civics and history ought to deal in depth with generalizable case studies taken from any relevant historical period or region of the world. These programs ought to stress the skills of inquiry--given a springboard students ought to be able to hypothesize about existing relationships or be able to take a position regarding a value conflict. The hypotheses and value positions must be clarified and explicitly grounded. Value clarification and analysis of social issues should become focal.

5. The evidence suggests that students become more politically efficacious when the classroom operates in the true spirit of inquiry. In such a classroom the teacher or the student may provide the springboards for discussion. The students, however, develop ideas and positions and test them against available evidence. Ideas or positions are challenged constantly by all. The student soon learns that grounds in support of positions or hypotheses are important. The better grounds one has the more likely that his ideas will be heard. The student also learns that it is easier to debate, adjudicate and, when necessary, compromise social ideas if the ideas are expressed in clear and communicable language. When the ideas are well defined then disagreements might disappear since often these disagreements result over the use of terms and certain expressions.

The teacher needs to create the psychological conditions which will support true inquiry. He rewards students for creative work and always encourages or praises them for their participation in discussion. The teacher always needs to challenge students to defend and clarify their ideas. Through his style and manner of presentation, the teacher makes clear from the very beginning that all statements or claims to knowledge are to be examined and then accepted or rejected

in the open forum of ideas. He develops and constantly reinforces the notions that neither authors of books nor teachers and students are immune from questioning and detailed probing.

In our research we find that classrooms generally fall into three categories--the expository, inquiry-non-probing, and inquiry probing classes.[3] In the expository class the teacher does most of the talking--his students have very little or no chance to present and test their own ideas. In the inquiry-non-probing class students participate a great deal but the teacher does not challenge these ideas by asking for the grounds that support them and for clarification of their meaning. In the inquiry-probing class the teacher and the students continuously probe into the evidence which purports to provide the grounds for certain propositions or value judgments. They also probe into the meaning of these propositions.

The differences among students resulting from participation in these three types of classrooms are striking. The inquiry-probing teacher is liked the most by the students. Students in the inquiry-probing classroom gain more cognitive understanding of the world and feel more competent in changing it than in the other types of classrooms. The student in the inquiry-probing class has a better grasp of his cognitive powers than do the students in the other types of classes. He is better prepared to face the problems of the future than his counterparts in the expository or inquiry non-probing classes.

To summarize my points: citizenship objectives must drastically change to reflect accurately the present and future conditions of the world. These objectives must be behaviorally based and must have as their central purpose the devel-

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[3] B. G. Massialas, Nancy Sprague, and Jo Ann Sweeney, Structure and Process of Inquiry into Social Issues in Secondary Schools: Volume III. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1970. (Research performed pursuant to contract OEC-7--61678-2942 with Office of Education).

opment of the activist--the individual who can take direct action based on his critical assessment of the social problem at hand. Only when the activist is the predominant product educators can claim that schools have come of age--they have become agents of social change rather than perpetrators of uninspiring traditions.